

London's last private medical school

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The last private medical school in London was Cooke's London School of Anatomy in Handel Street (then called Henrietta Street), Brunswick Square. It was opened in 1870¹ and was well established by 1878 when (Sir) John Bland-Sutton (1855-1936), later surgeon to the Middlesex Hospital, took an extra 6-months course of anatomy there because of the facility for dissection during the summer months. Sutton (as he then was) expressed great admiration for his teacher².

Thomas Cooke (1841-1899) obtained his medical education in Paris and after qualifying MD in 1870 came to London the same year and qualified MRCS in January 1871 and FRCS in June of the same year. He was appointed demonstrator in anatomy and elected assistant surgeon to Westminster Hospital. However, his training and experience had been entirely in Paris, he did not adapt himself to the hospital outpatient practice, and his surgery was pre-Listerian. He failed to utilize his considerable knowledge of anatomy to the practice of surgery¹. As a consequence he was passed over when vacancies occurred among the senior staff of the hospital.

Cooke was nevertheless an excellent demonstrator of anatomy, particularly useful to students who had been referred in this subject. He opened his School of Anatomy in a house on the corner of Handel Street and Henrietta Mews. It 'was entered from Handel Street, Brunswick Square, through a small gate in Henrietta Mews, a notice over the door bearing the words "Anatomy, Physiology and Surgery". There was a large dissecting room and an anatomical tank in which as many as 17 cadavers could be preserved. The grounds included part of an old graveyard, with tombstones remaining. A small cottage and a shed for storing books were attached.'¹

The change to Handel from Henrietta in the street name (made in 1888) was no doubt to commemorate Handel's great benefactions to the Foundling Hospital near by. Henrietta Mews is still there. The graveyard, laid out as a public open space in 1885 is now called St George's Gardens. It still has its tombstones. It was the joint burial ground of St George's Church,

Bloomsbury Way, and St George the Martyr, Queen Square.

In its best years the School had an annual turnover of more than 100 students. It was recognized by the universities of London and Durham, by the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and by the Society of Apothecaries. Besides anatomy and physiology, courses on operative surgery on the cadaver were given. Cooke died in 1899³ while demonstrating at the School and his son, F G Hamilton Cooke, who had previously assisted him, took over, aided by Edward Knight. However, improvements in teaching in the London medical schools and changes in the curriculum with which its teachers were unable to cope, led to its decline. The First World War hastened its end, although it was advertised in the *Medical Directory* as late as 1918. In the 1920 *Directory* Edward Knight is described as 'Sole Director of Cooke's School of Anatomy', a description changed in 1926 to 'Late Director'. Knight died in 1928 and an obituary in the *British Medical Journal* was contributed by no less a person than Sir James Dundas-Grant⁴.

It is an interesting coincidence that the London [Royal Free] School of Medicine was established in Handel Street in 1888 in a house opposite Cooke's School, and later expanded to the corner of Hunter Street; and even more interesting that in 1983 a London physician contemplated taking over the discarded Royal Free School building to set up a private medical school in London!⁵

References

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- 2 Bland-Sutton J. *The story of a surgeon*. London: Methuen, 1930:26
- 3 Obituary. T. Cooke. *BMJ* 1899;1:444
- 4 Obituary. E. Knight. *BMJ* 1928;2:1074
- 5 Private medical schools. *Library Association. Medical, Health and Welfare Group Newsletter* December 1983, News and Notes, p. ii

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